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BRUCE MANWARING
Ariana’s Suite IV
lithograph, 22” x 28”

Bruce W. Manwaring is an associate professor in the Department of Studio Arts, and past chair of Experimental Studios at Syracuse University. He is active in printmaking, drawing, and painting. He recently received a Senate Research Grant for experimental work in flat glass and handmade paper.
A Report on a Concert

GENE H. BELL-VILLADA

This text originally appeared in a scholarly pamphlet entitled The Fine Arts in Puerto Rico: Papers Read at a Symposium Held at the Fontainebleau Hotel, Miami Beach, Summer 1967. The “Contributors” section has a note about the author:

Nostalgia Núñez y Vázquez de Antequera lives in seclusion on his family latifundio, a sugar plantation pre-dating the Theodore Roosevelt era. Though not fond of public appearances, he made an exception in order to read his paper at the conference.

We wish to acknowledge our gratitude to Señor Núñez y Vázquez for permitting us, despite the delicate subject matter, to reprint his highly informative essay.—EDS.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

People get murdered every day of course, so I hope you will not misconstrue my account or its implications. What happened was indeed unusual, but, given numerous precedents in our past, we hardly were shocked. It all took place in the Teatro Tapia—itself something of a case in point. Now, as a visual artifact, that building, admittedly, is dull; even sympathetic tourists find it an unmemorable bore. Modest, scarcely imposing, it has yet to instill the good San Juan bourgeoisie (by far the most gullish and naive in all the Americas) with subjective wonder or civic pride. A sooty block of brownstone built circa 1910, it is utterly bereft of the warm, nostalgic afterglow of History; wanting in plate-glass windows, it lacks the modernist sheen. It is neither old nor new; not in Grand Style, it also missed the quality of intimacy. You look at the thing once and quickly forget.

How deceptive appearances can be! For few of our own people think of this prosaic hulk as the setting for numerous strange events, surprise-
dramas inconceivable, I daresay, to Carnegie Hall or Covent Garden habitués; nor could I imagine the likes of my report taking place in any one of those concrete culture-structures that the engineers and urban planners continue to graft so triumphantly onto the great American expressway.

Consider these samples from our musical history, facts known silently by the few, and thus undissemi nationed. I'm no frequenter of concerts; and yet in my sporadic visits to the Tapia I have seen Rubinstein fumble a C-major scale, dignified Dame Hess bathe herself in self-indulgent tears over some Brahms Intermezzo, and I. J. Paderewski—that wondrous, gracious, old-school gent—leave a notable imprint of his lesser-known side by proffering a number of Polish profanities, elicited when he triumphantly banged out, fortissimo, what was to be the concert's final E-major chord—and hit F minor instead.

There is an absurd moment in Blow-Up (yes, we receive those films) when a popular musician, seized with rage, smashes his guitar to bits. But is anyone fooled? We know it is only a fiction, born of a collusion between a Franco-Argentine yarn spinner and his rich Italian friend. I myself have seen better, and in real life at that: I am referring to Josef Szigeti, who, at risk of censure and ostracism, before our thousand-odd eyes reduced his famed Guarneri to about as many splinters by bashing it upon the cherubically blond head of his accompanist, seasoning the extraordinary show with tears and curses. The pianist, it turns out, had taken the finale too fast, too bouncy for Mr. Szigeti's comfort.

My head is aswim with such truly bizarre events... such as the South German maniac who, for an encore, played in its entirety a piano reduction of Also Sprach Zarathustra, threw in portions of Heidenleben, and also joined in and sang with the climaxes; or the countertenor from Australia who did all songs in his native accent and announced this as his newly devised revolutionary technique. I often wonder: do these people do this elsewhere? Are they using us for their little experiments? Anyway, our history is thick as any tropical jungle with this sort of thing, these baubles that give lustre to our concert life and yet scarcely receive a passing reference at lunchtime the next day.

So bear this in mind; please understand that the incident of which, thanks to this convention and its stimulus of privacy, you are now about to hear by no means shocked our admittedly provincial sensibilities. San Juan in its way has seen as much as London or Paris, let alone Los Angeles or Houston. We have probably seen more, since artists making stops in our country regularly succumb to a species of madness apparently unknown—un permissible, I daresay—in the concert halls of the Metropolis. I do not know why this should be the case. Perhaps the smell of diesel fumes (the worst in the world) drugs these pampered prime donne of the suburban north. Or the trouble may stem from the elusive, even amorphous cultural quality of the place, or—who knows—from the climate. After all, small islands, notably those in these latitudes, have a historic reputation for fostering lunacy of various sorts.

I speak, then, of an "unusual event"—but the event is only a trifle more so than other aberrant occurrences that Providence has time and
again visited upon us. The circumstances, on the other hand, were rather routine. No major expectations were sparked late last summer when *El Mundo* announced a recital to be given, in the Teatro Tapia’s Sunday evening series, by some hyphenated-Hungarian piano virtuoso, an up-and-coming parvenu trailing a few clouds of incipient glory. His program was made up of time-honored sequences: Bach-Busoni, Chopin Waltz in E-flat and a couple of mazurkas, the *Appassionata*, and—a bit of contemporary titillation—Ravel.

Still, a concert is a concert, especially on a dreary evening late in August. And I did know his name; one could sense—on the posters here and there, or in the foreign reviews cited with awe by our leading music critic and then bandied about by musicians in local artists’ cafes—a growing legend. I must admit that, as I went about my weekly business, I felt occasional flurries of anticipation and entertained hopes of their fulfillment for the future.

And so on Sunday I arrived at the Tapia, where an audience, familiar to me from these concerts, had taken their seats. A small group, it scarcely exists outside the Teatro’s confines, held together and informed by broadsides and gossip. Primitive and unstable bonds, these—but bonds no less real than whatever force brings our young bankers to the Friday night symphony. Moreover, these bonds, with unexpectedness among their virtues, are richer and livelier, more meaningful to audience members, who are ever aware of the role of chance in human relations.

Lights were dimmed at exactly 8:30. The pianist walked briskly onstage; due applause was accorded him. He was a handsome fellow in his mid-twenties, typically East European in his sleek gracefulness. The only blemish I could detect at that point was his obsequious smile, too well synchronized with his stylized bow. The smile immediately vanished as he turned to the piano stool.

**BEFORE I PROCEED,** something must be clarified. The fact is, I’m no music critic, and so I hope you’ll allow me some amount of inarticulateness on the subject. I do hope this warning will not be seen as a calculated subterfuge, a sly bit of self-exoneration. But I simply do not know most of the trade words that the music people here have bandied about, and I therefore must resort to subjective responses, vague impressionistic wisps and metaphors, a purely instinctive understanding—all couched furthermore in my brand of English, which isn’t English at all but an Anglo froth-on-Romance. It is with these scarcely adequate tools that I will try to convey what I believe happened during those intense two hours. Certainly the nonverbality of music is a lovely thing, the inspiration behind many a proverb and poem; but it is also a privation of Nature, one you will have to bear with yet further patience while I use a notoriously complicated language, the sounds and idioms of which my mind, in the twenty-odd years it took some seven decades ago to complete its full growth, never encountered nor suspected could exist.
From the piano now came the five bare notes of the celebrated opening phrase, pinlike emissions preparatory to the imminent volley of sound. They seemed to leap out at me; I shuddered in my awareness that something new and undiscovered was taking on musical shape and arousing us from a spiritual slumber. So new was it that no one could have foretold its nature or its magnitude. The piece was not unfamiliar; but until then we had heard it with a certain sensorial deadness, like the color-blind before a Raphael or a Giotto. A felicitous convergence of piece, pianist, and place was now rendering Bach more pertinent to our needs than all the family reunions and Sunday masses regularly shaping our lives. Raw psychic powers, concentrated intellect—they had spanned two centuries and united our minds with the scattered stuff we held in common, stripping the veil, giving us a glimpse of our darkest emotional depths.

The adagio, on the other hand, was the obverse side of the toccata, delicacy and restraint. Each measure came forth with an unprecedented pianissimo, as if anything much softer would have been sheer silence—an impression then belied by yet further diminuendo. There was an awesome rightness to it all, as if this Magyar, in stretching the limits of an ordinary Steinway, had rendered Bach's conception for the pipe organ permanently obsolete. There we were, experiencing unheard-of nuances of texture, levels of dynamics as yet unavailable to the most new-fangled electronic instruments. And it was most agreeable to hear the odd twists and turns of the coda (always a joy to my slightly eccentric tastes), their outlines often blurred in church performances, now displaying their fresh harmonic progressions within a sharply distinct set of contours.

Such purity, we found out, is not without interruptions. The lapse was brief, ten, fifteen seconds at most. But it was so disturbing, it resembled an elegant, well-bred lady who suddenly shucks off the game of genteel innocence, with all its flowery phrases, and, mouth distorted, inexplicably emits a few words of vicious, unrefined cruelty. Likewise, halfway through the fugue, our Hungarian lost control of both hands and then pressed down on the loud pedal, turning Bach's crystal counterpoint into a vile and messy blur. The musical effect was horrid enough, but we were even more disconcerted by his body all at tremble and his face nodding in fear from side to side, while he repeatedly cried "no!" to an unseen force. He then pounded the keyboard with his fists, as if to exorcise the malicious poltergeist that had turned his neat succession of sixteenth notes into a swarm of quavers on the loose. This was followed by one of those shrieks we hear maybe once in our lives, a sound claimed by no language, and which nonetheless we recognize as a cry of desperation. And it brought him results: the ultimate puppet master seemed immediately pacified. The Magyar returned to his magical realm as if nothing had happened, just as scratches on a long-playing record, once passed, do not intrude upon the grooves that follow.

The applause was tumultuous, of course. And in it there was more than the admiration of small-time dabblers for an achievement hopelessly beyond their dreams. I could sense a more genuine appreciative-
ness mingling with their symbolic approval, a real warmth, the love-like feeling of a hostess toward a visitor who, though rude and irreverent, can ultimately be trusted.

But disappointment was to strike again: the same run of events came with the Chopin, and the intruding element became worse. He first granted us the rapturous ecstasy we had known during Bach; his rendition suggested the crisp elegance natural to a nineteenth-century dancer; it evoked the shared spirit of European aristocrats, intent on living out the October of their lives amid resplendent chandeliers, dazzling neobaroque ornaments, long and spacious halls.

The Magyar upset it all with a relapse into chaos. There is a little moment in this waltz, slower than the rest of the piece, where an in­istent three-quarter time briefly subsides, giving the dancers a lyrical respite. In an imaginary antiworld, where climax consists of increasing not the volume but the nuances, of lowering not raising one's voice, these sixteen measures of G-flat would be not a pause but a cadenza, a singular flourish of near silence. But our guest artist, who had just created new touchstones, revolutionized taste, now fell prey to a banal sentimentalism quite normal for our San Juan—but just not right for Chopin. He played this G-flat section (marked meno mosso)—he played this section molto più lento, ma strenuissimamente rubato. And with such distressing results!—graceful two-measure phrases that first sang smoothly but were at once seized by a grotesque convulsion; decelerandi that reached the end of their curious curves, only to swoop and spread their wings like a seagull turned monster. Meanwhile, his heavy breathing, with its inimitable grunts, seemed Nature's most fitting soundtrack to this horrific music drama, our shaking heads its best choreography.

And then, that wondrously simple three-note phrase brought back the joyous sounds that the pianist had previously held up to us. For all I know, he may have purposefully snatched them away in order to punish those who would take his playing for granted—after all, as many of us too well know, anything is possible here on this earth. Well, he ended the piece, and we cried “bravo!” though not too far back in our minds the classic gestures of bewilderment—nervous hands facing up, ruffled brow—clamored for release. Only our polite traditions held them back.

But our bafflement still hadn’t reached its peak. Now, there are real dangers in blanket statements, I recognize this. Moreover, one knows how many individuals, out of an undefinable need to verbalize their private assortment of makeshift absolutes, will welcome those occasions when they can pronounce something or other as best or worst of its kind. And even if these categorical outbursts, their emotionalism clothed respectfully in sober words of reason—like a lunatic at large in a three-piece suit—are not as a rule taken seriously, I feel in some way justified in saying that his mazurkas were the very worst playing I have ever heard, that in them he seemed to have summoned up all the technical inaccuracies and errors of taste that others had committed separately—and we promptly forgiven—in hundreds of concerts throughout the century.

I have no doubt you would agree with me if you had witnessed this disaster. How else could anyone have judged him? There I sat in
respectful silence, honestly wishing this young man well, and instead I was bombarded with wrong notes, unintended dissonances, upside-down dynamics (forte for piano and vice versa), sheer omission of sections that the audience had scheduled for an appearance, plus a rigid angularity in his interpretation, music rendered geometrically when any fool knows it should be done gracefully, like a delicate web of interlacing curves. Throughout it all something made him hold tenaciously onto the pedal as if it were his last available foothold in a crumbling structure. Meanwhile he had assumed a fittingly rigid posture: thighs and torso in a ninety-degree angle, only his forearms moving. The one sign of disaffection on his part was the strange grin of troubled folk, which to others often appears as a vindictive grimace.

Only when he ended the mazurka abruptly with a seventh chord, shrugging his shoulders, did we realize our breaths were held. We had been waiting in suspense for his ancient magic to reappear, a wish now thwarted. And our listless applause came in contrast to the electrifying public love that, moments earlier, had seized and unified an atomized coterie; now you heard discrete cracks, loose sounds reminiscent of the stringy, breathy orchestral gibberish normally preceding the oboe’s concert A.

II

T WAS INTERMISSION TIME NOW, but the hall remained dark. We sat still, holding back mixed torrents of stricture and praise. We were saving it for the foyer, where we’d give our frustration civilized shape. I assumed in all sureness that we would file out silently, as if in a procession, feeling wistful about our losses. This is what will happen, I thought.

But two minutes went by in a dark, frozen stillness, and that cherished moment when flimsy cooperation blooms into active camaraderie simply never came. Or at least not exactly that. The Magyar’s head now peeked in at stage left; the rest of him entered and tiptoed silently over to the piano stool, where he collapsed like a bag of stones. He gazed briefly at the ceiling, ran one hand through his hair, punched his hip with the other. He turned to us; a strangely hollow voice—I could have sworn a ventriloquist was doing the talking—spoke up. (The translation, by the way, is mine; I have corrected his atrocious grammar and syntax, with no attempt on my part to mimic his odd accent.)

Ladies and Gentlemen,
It is with utmost pain, a pain matched only by my personal anguish felt over these befouled performances, that I bring such lamentable news to the illustrious body of citizens gathered here tonight. Circumstances beyond our control, however, demand that I do away with the intermission. I know too, too well that the intermission is very dear to all your hearts. But I feel that the decision is ultimately in the public interest, for your welfare and for mine both. And so, that we may make the best of our brief and happy spell together and in such a way render the fittingest homage to our glorious heroes’ bones, I find it an absolute and imperative necessity that I begin the Beethoven, now, within brief mo-
ments [a vile phrase, obviously lifted unthinkingly from Iberian Railroad departure announcements]. Those who have no stomach for my modest alterations will leave the room in respectful silence; however they stand warned that their hateful act will bring them grave consequences.

He remained immobile, as if to put the gaze of guilt on whoever was considering escape. But the measure was unnecessary, as he had just taken us across the boundary separating vague uncertainty from plain confusion. We were all paralyzed as a result.

We heaved a sigh of relief when he put his hands on the keyboard—a relief quite short lived. The minute he began to play, we realized he had completely omitted the first movement and proceeded, without explanation, to the andante. More, his playing, while not a lamentable disgrace this time, showed little to distinguish it from the flat, tasteless doodling of a pedantic adolescent. The entire slow movement went by in this fashion. Its faster-moving variations were a reminder that Czerny had studied with the Viennese master—save that, in this case, we were witnessing a curious process, the reduction of a teacher’s highly developed art to its elementary rhythmic components. The upshot of this inverse metamorphosis is a dull, if artful, exercise.

Suddenly, just when I felt myself dozing off, I heard that unforgettable diminished chord—and the Magyar mysteriously resumed his sweeping, premazurka style of piano playing. The chord, surely the chord, did it. It is simply amazing how a great composer can fashion such an aggregate of sounds, so unlike anything else, so unique and yet so right, that the astonished listeners, reacting as if they had just met an extraordinary person or read an extraordinary book, are shaken from their sleep and become aware of a myriad unexplored possibilities, both in themselves and in the world. This strangely shaped diminished chord was the pianist’s midwife, violently extracting the revolutionary standards carried by him somewhere in the back of his mind. Here were our hopes, being satisfied once again!

He reached the first climax. It was an overwhelming fortissimo, so massive it seemed solid, tangible, as if the incredible density of notes could have been seized and caressed—when The Enemy put in a final appearance. The Hungarian switched his styles; again he floundered hopelessly, scurrying random fashion all over the keyboard. His legs danced about; he looked like a hysterical white rat, trapped in the gigantic maze of a sadistic American psychologist. As for ourselves, these periodic disruptions of preestablished musical order had led us to a state of mental malfunctioning, the prelude to a total breakdown.

Suddenly the music stopped. The silence, so abrupt and empty, seemed even more terrifying than all of his bad playing.

He arose from the piano stool with a jerky movement. Throughout the sonata his features had appeared fixed and immutable. But his poker face now changed to a look of despair. Tears fell fast; pointing at someone with his left index finger he cried out, “I won’t stand for
this anymore! Why don't you behave? Why can't you leave me in peace? The Beethoven is ruined, I'm a wreck, and it's all your fault!"

I was quite surprised when I realized this harangue was being addressed to a chap just three rows in front of me, especially since he had sat perfectly still during the concert's worst moments. Everyone knew him without knowing much about him. A small and delicate Rumanian, soft spoken and shy, he had been pitilessly knocked around by the European wars before settling in San Juan some twenty years ago, where he ran a modest antique shop near González Padin. He attended all the plays and concerts, where he always greeted me faithfully with a reserved smile, suggesting warmth stifled by isolation. His smallish circle of friends and relatives touched upon, but rarely overlapped with, the greater San Juan society. His antique shop suggested the very best of tastes, while one sartorial idiosyncrasy of his tended to cause us some discomfort—his predilection for bright green bow ties. Beyond these obvious facts there lay a vast lacuna, unknown to all even in the essentials.

And now to my astonishment I saw this harmless sexagenarian faced with an extraordinary, and seemingly gratuitous, accusation. The piano virtuoso shattered our startled silence: "Yes, you, don't look surprised! Do you think that idiot look of innocence can fool me?!" Still weeping he leaped down from the stage and ran toward the Rumanian, sputtering away in a shrill voice: "Your fault, your fault, it's all your fault."

The Rumanian threw up his hands with a gesture of incredulity and attempted to plead his case: "No, no, no, it isn't my fault. Don't suggest such a..."

"You grumbling little hypocrite," the Magyar cut him short. "How dare you deny your crimes, when you have been caught in flagrante delicto by the scores of witnesses here? This is perjury!" By now the pianist had hurdled the rows of seats and landed before the accused. He seized him by the hair, slapped him repeatedly. He beat the old man's forehead with his fists, saying, "You horrible, vile creature! What right have you to bring these evils on me? Insolent upstart! Behave!"

To my surprise, I heard voices from the audience furnishing a choral obbligato, saying, "Destroy the old man!" "Yes, it's all his fault!" "Kill him, kill him!" and the like. Some rushed over, hoping to carry out these commands. From almost all sides there was encouragement. Many people stamped their feet, others clapped, a few nodded assent. The virtuoso now had him by the throat; the Rumanian, all bloody, dangled loose in his aggressor's hold and repeated mechanically, as if with no ability to rephrase, "I'm not I'm not I'm not" and occasionally, "No no don't suggest that!" But the pianist directed more strength onto his victim, gashing at his neck. The loudness of his voice, and the variety of his recriminations, seemed limitless.

By now the Rumanian was silent and still, probably dead. But the virtuoso kept kicking him in the ribs, vilifying him more ferociously than when he had been an alleged threat. And then, the dénouement: the attack that had shocked me by its suddenness (like everything else
the young man had done) began to disappear, slowly and painfully. As you'll remember, until now this youth had let out torrents of confusion that then stopped in their course, as if by a biblical magic. This time it subsided with a slowness almost geological. Rather than an onslaught of silence, there were a number of blank interstices eroding the sound material between them, fusing in the end. It was like watching a city turn dark, one light at a time.

Anyway, the Hungarian's long seizure gradually lost momentum until its last phase, when two rapid blows were followed by a deathly soundlessness; another blow, a longer silence; five feeble slaps on the old man's face, and Hungarian collapses on Rumanian's corpse, although I was near enough to see an unsteady left elbow propping up his trembling torso.

And what a tableau! Every last one of us was standing perfectly still, as if posing for a science fiction painter's wildest fantasy, some master dream entitled "Time has stopped," while, close by, the stertorous breathing of the pianist served as a reminder that things were a bit less dramatic, more normal than that. And it struck me a few weeks later that this violence had come as a needed rest for our overworked minds, literally a breather for our lungs, paralyzed as they had been by our embarrassment at the pianist's repeated lapses into bad behavior.

Hard upon this dream came the reality of people who move, the unsettling geometry of impermanent forms. Oddly enough, the collective motion was executed with an almost professional smoothness. The virtuoso made his way to the stage and, after wiping his hands on his inside pockets, clambered up like a refugee from battle, even as the spectators returned to their seats with an ease that seemed rehearsed. I have seen such high-quality coordination only at the best operatic productions, where the supporting chorus practices unstintingly to make a complex group movement into something natural, like singing in thirds.

THERE WAS A MIRACLE, but it came bit by bit. We waited patiently while the pianist, slouched over like a drunkard, put his hands perfunctorily on the keys. A minute elapsed; there was no motion from his cocoonlike body. He thundered out that chord—he had decided to begin the finale once again. We were as yet unable to judge what we could hear. The little cadenza then issued forth, fluttered haltingly about the room, somewhat unsure of itself as it faced a slightly altered landscape. The speck of sound scarcely stirred up the silence, no more than a sail on the horizon much alters the view of ocean and sky. Finally, the main theme made its reentry; we yielded promptly to its implacable force.

And now, I realize I must underestimate everything. So far I've done my best with your troublesome language; I have probably exhausted my most time-tested methods of idiom-to-idiom transmutation. Alas, I have also stolen this moment's thunder. Mere metaphors, empty words—how am I to rely on them now? All I can say is that, until then, none of us had ever felt such overpowering joy, such exultation. The
delights that poets sing, and all the happiness we had squeezed from
two or three select moments in our lives, dwindled instantly to child-
ish antecedent. The pleasures of time past now appeared but dubious
and tentative; the bliss and rapture of the first half of the concert were
revealed as a false start, mindless frivolities that we somehow mistook
for the summits of sentiment. Within minutes the Magyar had trans-
formed us from raw apprentices into seasoned masters, as quickly as
if some modern-day psychosurgeon had insinuated himself into our
heads and tampered with our brains.

The prestissimo coda had us all on our feet. Some were straddled
on the armrests of their seats, believing that this way they could hear
more and better. It is no use trying to describe our quasi-religious ec-
stasy during the final measures, a state of frenzied excitement that
begged for an outlet of cheers and clapping. Beethoven's last chords
and our tumultuous applause came simultaneously. Seventeen curtain
calls followed. About the Ravel I shall only say that our excitement
was still greater—and that there were no interruptions.

Encores consisted of three Chopin études and some awful Liszt.
Throughout it all the Rumanian's body remained in a heap where the
Hungarian had dumped him, and for all I know it may have contributed
in some way to the whole thing. Meanwhile there inexplicably took
shape amongst us an unspoken agreement to blame it all on a stroke,
with self-inflicted violence to account for the contusions and gore. (Later
that evening members of his grief-stricken family muttered something
about having expected it any day now.) What hidden forces lie behind
these tacit agreements are as much a mystery to me as they are to you.
Fortunately for myself, an arts convention such as this does not allow
for any extended ventures into the psychological.

One last point, something quite baffling to my foreign friends. If
hundreds were to go and make this public, in fact if everyone who
knows about that concert were to climb the walls and shout it from
their housetops, I doubt if there would be a scandal—either on the
island or elsewhere. Strange occurrences, as I said before, are normal
with us; they proliferate too rapidly for the doltish American reporters
to follow them up. Moreover, the memory of these events lingers on
merely as a nebulous presence, shared in secrecy by the witnesses, and
never questioned. Only on rare occasions does the U.S.-owned El
Imparcial—more Daily News than the Daily News—carry so much as a
brief résumé, usually in the “Fine Arts” section. (It did this time, and
no one seems to have noticed.) Meanwhile, as for myself, except for
special occasions such as this one, I don’t broadcast it. I am one whom
life has taught to accept a great deal, and I have no particular desire
to give the world more grist for its thoughtless, pleasure-seeking mill.

(applause)